

Parasitic Beliefs in Buddhism

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“Over the years, a small group of us residing on opposite sides of the globe have been sharing thoughts on a variety of subjects over the internet. Religion and philosophy have been popular among them. We openly communicate our thoughts, and each of us gains from the ideas and materials that the other brings to the table. A complimentary comment made by a friend on a discussion topic was the motivation behind why I wrote this book. I would like to use this opportunity to convey my sincere gratitude to two of my comradely friends in the group for their assistance in helping me make this book richer.”

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## Introduction

Buddhist literature is replete with widely held pre-Buddhist beliefs in addition to the Dharma that the Buddha discovered. When the life of the Buddha is carefully examined, it becomes clear how and why the majority of Vedic concepts entered Buddhist teachings and why they are more popular than the core Dharma. It is clear that enlightened monks had concerns about the discrepancies between Vedic conceptions like reincarnation and Karma, which are predicated on a soul, and Buddhist ideas like Anatta (the nonexistence of a soul) that were contradictory. The reasons why the Buddha included widely accepted beliefs at the time in his teachings are logically explored in the essay.

Although it's frequently argued that Buddhism is neither a philosophy nor a religion but rather a path to be pursued, it does present both a philosophical and a religious structure. After Gautama Buddha discovered Dharma and set out on a mission to spread its teachings for the benefit of all people, the religious stream of beliefs continued to evolve with additions of new

spiritual practices and superstitious beliefs introduced by the followers, though pure Buddhism is anti-superstition at its core.

This essay is a balanced analysis from a unique standpoint; it examines a crucial bifurcation in Buddhism in the context that gave rise to it and offers a reasoned, thought-provoking, and holistic view of two contrasting perspectives, one of total acceptance based on hardwiring influenced by faith and social conditioning at childhood, and the other based on critical review and selective acceptance based on liberated, insightful thinking in adulthood.

## Religions

Religions render you a finely spun “story” to draw your attention to their message with the motive to win your firm allegiance. Basically, the story says that your life has chronic issues that need to be addressed as they affect your destination in life after death. The religion that perturbs your psyche with this induced fear also provides guidance to address the issues, assuring that your present life is peaceful and that the life after death is blissful. The

story first subtly plants the seed of fear and panic to disturb your psyche by predicting a dire fate if you live heedlessly.

Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism offer liberation of self from the cycle of birth and death as a solution to the problem that goes with the narration of their stories. You sadly get caught in the religion's introduced snares and keep yourselves preoccupied in dealing with them, which are like cancers to your mind and life. Under the influence of these stories, people emotionally and childishly rebel against those who do not believe their individual story, forgetting that all are fellow human beings who are dutifully following the particular teaching that their parents or elders injected into them at a tender age with undeveloped reasoning skills.

What is essential is to identify the type of cancer religion induced in you and reflect on why you got caught in it. The day you realize this fact in a broad and deep sense, the correction and clarity it will bring will easily help you to regain a balanced view devoid of the fake views the religion introduced into you. It will take a lengthy battle of reasoning between you and the person you always have an inner dialogue with to sort this out. The 'story' of Buddhism is not an exception to those of other religions in maintaining a compulsive dominating mechanism that keeps us chained to our initial indoctrination. Let us examine the pitfalls.

Religious ideologies are built on foundational stories created at a time when there were no written stories. The stories are mostly imaginary fabrications, carefully crafted to stimulate tender feelings, to attract followers. Stories are easy to remember, and hence this media has been used as an efficient tool by religious leaders to propagate their ideologies. As these stories are imaginary, they provide ample room for their followers to modify and expand them with their own imaginations to suit their psyches.

All forms of paranormal and supernatural beliefs originated just after man evolved from hunter to hunter-gatherers. The spare time hunter-gatherers had for thinking was the reason for the origin of beliefs. They thought deeply about the shocking experience of natural deaths that they did not experience as hunters before. They also wondered why some of their grandchildren resembled their ancestors and why the ancestors they saw in dreams often talked to them. These reasons lead to belief in the spirits of the dead. Shamanism was the next addition to their society, where shamans provided the role of communication with the dead to get the help they wanted from the spiritual world. Nature gods followed by religious stories gradually came into human society at a later stage with the



introduction of multiple deities. Most polytheistic religions were gradually replaced by monotheistic religions. Religious beliefs explained the unknowns, attributing them to the powers of deities.

Beliefs were more beneficial to primitive man than to modern humans, as they had a hard life to cope with. As an evolutionary trait, the modern brain still has rudiments inherited from the primordial brain, influencing us to adopt spiritual beliefs and seek help from imaginary sources to deal with hard situations in life. We cannot deny the reality that religions have provided enormous support to humanity by way of comforting weak psyches, from the era of primitive hunter-gatherers to modern humans. The real nature of this form of comfort is undoubtedly psychological, and it is comparable to the placebo effect.

*“One of the great tragedies of mankind is that **morality has been hijacked by religion**. So, now people assume that religion and morality have a necessary connection. But the basis of morality is really very simple and doesn't require religion at all.”*

*– Arthur C. Clarke*

On the topic of religious beliefs, let us proceed to evaluate the two streams of Buddhism that emerged after Gautama Buddha appeared in the world around 550 BC. We can investigate the

constituents of the core discovery of the Buddha and then appraise its relevance to the two streams of Buddhism that its followers believe in and practice today.

## **Core Discovery of Buddha**

It's clear that both the tool and subject of the Buddha's research field was the "mind," while his aim was to find the root causes of Dukkha (unpleasantness) to arrive at a solution to eliminate Dukkha, as is recorded in Buddhist literature.

Buddha spent over seven years on his arduous research project and finally found what he was looking for. However, the Buddha was initially hesitant to teach what he had discovered, as he felt it was too complicated for the average person to understand. But, upon reflecting further, he concluded that wiser people would be able to grasp the essence of his discovery while others would be able to benefit, even if to a lesser degree. He then decided to embark on his teaching mission.

The essence of Buddha's discovery was included in his first discourse, known as the **Dhammacakkappavattana sutta**, and

thereafter, the **Anattalakkana sutta**, which he presented to the five ascetics who were familiar with his research work and well versed in understanding the content. This discourse would have a resemblance to one where a modern-day scientist makes a presentation to a panel of intellectuals who can understand the findings and make a judgment on the validity of the contents. As regards the actual case of Buddha's presentation, the five ascetics not only understood but were also readily and independently convinced of the Buddha's findings. They also became his first disciples and immediately volunteered to broadcast his discovery.

The core Dharma elements revealed in these two suttas were the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the concept of Anatta (i.e., the nonexistence of a soul). The Noble Eightfold Path was the prescription for ending Dukkha. However, we may note that neither the Buddha nor any of his disciples were able to achieve cessation of Dukkha arising from sickness, aging, and death. Hence, we need to have a comprehensive understanding of his overall focus to make sense of Buddha's prescription.

## Home of Dukkha and Anatta Concept

If we observe how, or through what, we experience pleasant or unpleasant feelings, we see all these taking place in our mind, while illnesses, aging, and death, like Dukkha events, are physical processes natural to any living being and are not preventable from occurring. Therefore, it must follow that the remedy of Buddha for cessation of Dukkha, is only applicable to Dukkha occurring in the home of Dukkha which is the mind. In “Buddha science”, the mind is central to all things, as rendered in the Dhammapada starting with the Pali language verse **“Manopubbangama dhamma.”** Examples of mental Dukkha are sadness, sorrow, distress, grief, misery, lamentation, despair, association with unpleasant persons, dissociation from pleasant persons, not getting what one wants, and so on. Pleasant feelings, however, are the opposite of these, and nobody complains about them. It is noteworthy that there is a sizable chunk of mental Dukkha introduced by the religions to keep their followers worried about things like the afterlife and various religious duties that they are obliged to observe and perform.

The Noble Eightfold Path is the prescription to end Dukkha. It specifies eight elements for contemplation. The element, “Right

Speech" is a good example to demonstrate the contribution it makes to mitigate Dukkha. The application of thoughtfulness in speech yields a proper groundwork for harmony, creates pleasant conditions, and reminds one to choose sensible words to utter. The practice of "Right Speech" is easy if you have really understood the purpose of the two streams of Buddhist meditation and had some training. The practice of "Samatha" aids in capturing the mental moment in habitual conversation and awakens the mind to shift to a thoughtful or mindful mode to continue in accordance with its training in "Vipassana." The practice of "Right Speech" takes off an enormous portion of Dukkha causing thoughts and feelings in life. Give some thought to evaluating the impact of "Right Speech" that can bring happiness into one's quality of life!

Similarly, a deep analysis of the "Wisdom" elements of the path reveals ignorance as the root cause of Dukkha. This in turn will show the importance of how all eight elements of the path contribute to eliminating Dukkha causing thoughts and feelings. Practitioners of the Noble Eightfold Path infuse these eight elements into their thinking processes to foster the generation of thoughts, not leading to arising of Dukkha. On becoming adept, a person sees the validity of the statement, "There is simply no stress in the world, only people thinking stressful thoughts."

Taking all the Dharma elements into consideration, the **Anatta concept** stands out as the unique discovery of the Buddha. It's the icing on the cake of Buddha's Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path. It is fundamental, far-reaching, and negates the concept of a soul. The soul (or atman) was central to Hinduism, the religion of most people in Buddha's time. Anatta is unique to Buddhist teaching and is at variance with the major religions, which all assert the existence of a soul. As with Einstein's Relativity, Anatta often baffles readers as counter-intuitive and incomprehensible. Is this the reason Buddha hesitated to reveal his findings? Let us keep this in mind for us to discuss later, but let's briefly attempt here to evaluate Anatta and the thinking process.

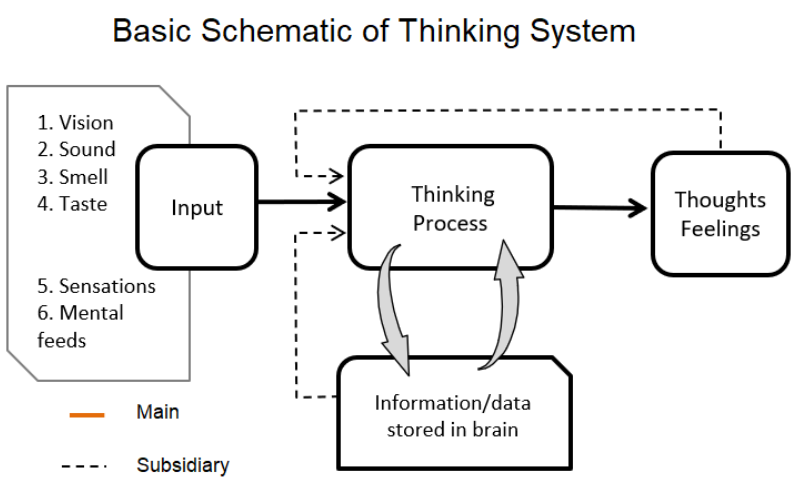
In an era, the function of the brain was not known, it is incredible that the Buddha understood the workings of the mind with such thorough depth and utter clarity. To explain Anatta, the Buddha used two categories of truths, namely, "conventional truth" and "ultimate truth." He stated the word 'soul' is commonly used as a conventional truth for communication purposes, but under ultimate truth, there is no such thing as I, soul, or self that can be rooted in a person.

The idea of self is created by feelings arising from thinking. The feeling of I originated in infancy and continually gets imbued in the memory. Hence, it is an inseparable feel of life. Just like the mirage we see is an imaginary visual thought created by eye-brain networks, the self is a delusional thought created by our sensory inputs, memory, and brain networks. The feeling of I does not go away from our thinking system but lingers in the background or the subconscious depths of our brain throughout life.

Thinking happens through the trillions of neural networks that we have developed since infancy. These networks will keep running till death if our brain is healthy. There is no brain cell network or combination of brain networks that takes the central role in thinking, representing a commander's responsibility. Basically, we have a commander-less living system developed from infancy that gets firmer, undergoes improvement, and gets updated as we gain knowledge and experience in life. As most functional systems we see around the world are commander-centered operations, it is hard for us to comprehend the functioning of a commander-less system.

The "feeling of I" only exists when we are awake as well as when we are dreaming. In both of these situations, thinking continually occurs in the brain. In awake situations, signals from the five

senses and our memory are the data sources that lead to the generation of new thoughts and feelings.



Sometimes the thought you just had becomes the source for initiating a new thought by looping it back as an input signal (see diagram). In dreams, our senses are not active, but memory can get triggered to provide data to initiate the thinking process. The streams of thought we generate this way in REM (**R**apid **E**ye **M**ovement) sleep are interpreted as dreams if these thoughts are remembered on waking up.

When we are unconscious or in deep (non-REM) sleep, the situation is vastly different. Our thinking processes are fully shut



off, and we do not generate any thoughts in the brain to create feelings of I, self, or soul, or of a thinker. You may question what happens to the soul, self, or I, in these two cases. If there is no formation of thoughts there are no feelings to create a self, soul, or I. Hence, simple logic proves that the feeling of "I" comes into existence only when the brain is in thinking mode. Waking up from these two situations at each time is really a new mental birth (similar to re-booting a computer) with the luxury of having access to your past data and ready-made thinking programs to continue your life. But where does all the religious reasoning behind the afterlife of an unconscious person or a person who is in deep sleep, in whom we just established that a soul clearly does not exist, if that person dies under any of the two situations, unconscious or in deep non-REM sleep? This is a great question to ponder!

Defining mind as a noun is meaningless as it refers only to what is taking place (dynamism) in a thinking process, which follows as a set of sequential mind moments. The Buddhist texts refer to these mind moments as ***uppada*** (genesis), ***thiti*** (processing), and ***bhanga*** (cessation). These are the three stages of the thought-generating process. As per this process, each thought ceases at the third stage of its existence. This will be good if it happens to all the thoughts we generate. But unfortunately, the thoughts of Dukkha get looped back (see diagram) into our thinking cycle

again and again, preserving by repetition the feelings of Dukkha. Also, depending on the severity or significance of the events associated with the thought generated, the particular event information could get stored in memory. Therefore, Sukha (pleasant) or Dukkha feelings (ex., sadness due to a close relative's death) continue to linger in our lives as Dukkha or Sukha seeds for a long time. Whenever any of these seeds get involved in the thinking process, we experience either pleasant or unpleasant feelings. If these seeds get erased from memory, the feelings associated with them also cease to exist, as explained in Paticca-Samuppada in Buddhism.

## **Molding of Our Psyche by the Beliefs of Others**

It is important to understand that whatever knowledge exists within the world originated with some person, whether you hear them from Tripitaka, the Bible, Koran, Google, or a stranger. There are no exceptions, and covers all cases, from quantum mechanics to something simple like calling an item a table. To call something a table, a language has to be invented first. Hence, it is important to understand that our psyche is continuously gets conditioned

by others' ideas, from birth to death. Learning a language from the time we are 12 months old; we begin accelerating the conditioning process of our psyche as our ability to communicate takes hold.

With the establishment of this ability, far-reaching changes began to affect us. Our parents, clergy, society, teachers, friends, media, and many other parallel sources begin feeding us numerous types of information that influence our developing psyche. In addition to this external information, the ideas we create on our own also contribute to the ongoing process of influencing and nurturing our psyche. As a result of the way our psyche gets nurtured, our thinking becomes biased due to the influence of preconceived ideas and egocentric attitudes that we are raised into. This is one of the reasons why each of us thinks differently, carries our own personality, and possesses characteristics like tribal tendencies, likes and dislikes, alliances, attitudes, and many other traits. This deep-seated conditioning of the psyche creates in our decision making and analysis a partiality that most of us are unwilling to acknowledge, even in the face of convincing evidence. This fact is true for all our judgments, including our judgments on strongly held beliefs.

## **Conditioning of Siddhartha's Psyche**

In the case of the Buddha, from the time he was born as Prince Siddhartha, there were prophecies by various royal councilors that one day he would become a great religious leader. These predictions made about his future were known to the whole community in the kingdom and could not have been unknown to the adult prince, despite attempts by his father to keep him in the dark. In keeping with the norms, Siddhartha, as a prince, has, as a matter of course, been inducted into educational and other training to garner the skills required to rule his father's kingdom. Because the people, including his parents, followed a version of the Hindu religion that prevailed in his time, the prince would have received a thorough grounding in Hinduism.

We can reasonably assume that the Hindu background he acquired was the principal source of ideology that conditioned his psyche to be attracted to spirituality. Further, his awareness of the prophecies made about him would also have influenced him. Thereby, the seed to seek spiritual liberation would have been sown, causing him to set out to find the root cause of Dukkha and a way to end it rather than to spend his time honing the skills needed for kingship.

Contrary to the soft personality with which people picture Prince Siddhartha, he was a strong-willed revolutionary. He started his journey by going against his father's wishes; he was not satisfied with what he learned from spiritual teachers, he rebelled against the socially accepted norms like the caste system, low social status given to women and was strongly against ritualistic animal sacrifices. He questioned and challenged widely accepted Hindu concepts and did not settle down, even in questioning himself critically, until he found what he was looking for by researching deeply into the workings of the human mind.

However, considering his great desire and arduous effort to find a way out of Dukkha, it is baffling why the Buddha initially hesitated to disseminate his discovery to all. Could the inability to understand his teachings except by learned persons be the only reason? This is a reasonable question to be raised and thought out thoroughly. Obviously, there were more reasons for it than that. Let us explore further!

## **Influence of Hinduism**

Initially, the ascetic Siddhartha's aim would have been to work toward achieving Moksha because of the conditioning he absorbed from Hindu teachings. This assumption can be supported by the six years of austere practice he endured with the assistance of his five intelligent ascetic companions who had grown up as Hindus. The fact that the five ascetics supported him for six long years and then immediately abandoned him the instant he gave up the austere practices indicates that what the ascetic Siddhartha had been following was Hindu methodology.

The Hindu text "Brihadaranyaka Upanishad," defines Moksha as the highest achievement to liberate the soul from the cycle of birth and death. When a person who has achieved the state of Moksha dies, his soul joins Brahman, the supreme existence. In the Upanishads, Brahman also has attributes such as supreme power, eternal existence, and universal energy.

We need to reflect that most people who lived in India at the time of the Buddha were followers of Hinduism as it existed in his time. Hence, most people were conditioned by Hindu ideology with concepts like the soul (atman), karma, reincarnation, gods, evil

spirits, maya, jhana, etc., as these were integral to their belief system. Buddha's discovery of anatta (i.e., the nonexistence of a soul) was a vitiating challenge to the idea of a soul or atman that was inextricably embedded in Hindu beliefs. Thus, the Buddha would have certainly seen that preaching anything contrary to the general beliefs would not be prudent if he wanted to avoid a fierce backlash by inviting the people's attention to his groundbreaking findings. Especially, the anatta concept had no chance of getting accepted by anybody until he became sufficiently free of his Hindu conditioning to understand it in depth.

Buddha's initial hesitation to teach his findings must have been due primarily to the negative effects of the deep-seated beliefs in soul-based Hindu concepts that existed at that time.

Getting listeners to objectively evaluate any ideas that run even slightly counter to their entrenched beliefs is a nightmare for any preacher. Our conditioned psyches have inbuilt defense mechanisms that react often very repulsively to different ideas, that question or deviate from one's strongly held beliefs. The sharpness of reactive dissent is very evident from the incidents we hear of violent attacks on believers of other religions, destruction of religious sites, and even the conduct of suicide missions by adherents to protect their ideologies in the name of their divinities. Surprisingly, violent actions can be found even

between factions of the same religion and demonstrates the complex manner in which belief systems dominate the human psyche.

## **Buddha's Teaching Strategy**

Buddha, as a self-taught master of human psychology, would have rightly appraised the deep attachment of people to their cherished beliefs. Therefore, he would have set out to adopt an appropriate strategy to propagate his teachings in an optimal manner that would also avoid rocking the beliefs of the time. Let us now review the strategy Buddha adopted to touch the spiritual side of people to propagate Dharma.

As stated at the outset, what all religions tell us are attractively presented stories to bind adherents. Common to these stories are heaven(s), hell(s), God(s), blissful rewards for good conduct, and horrible punishments for bad conduct in the afterlife. As opposed to a supreme God in Abrahamic religions, Hinduism features a collection of multiple gods and goddesses structured under a supreme entity named Brahman, as we discussed. Reincarnation and karma were also popular beliefs in Hinduism. Reincarnation



allows for control over your destiny in the next life depending on your behavior in the present life. Depending on the accumulation of meritorious or demeritorious karma, the destiny after death could be birth in heaven, hell, back on earth as a human or any other form of living being, such as an animal. It is also noteworthy that the very early Hindu teachings had afterlife destinations limited to heaven and hell as in other religions. But, as an answer to the question of what would happen to the soul of a person if all his good merit karma got spent and exhausted by the end of his stay in heaven, a new idea of reincarnation back on earth as a human or other living form was introduced.

In view of the foregoing, we can assume that it was imperative that Buddha had to blend some of the Hindu concepts into his strategy to succeed in his mission of rolling out the Dharma, amenable to the populace. Dharma concepts under this strategy were more matched to a religious format rather than the factual philosophical format that he presented to the five ascetics soon after his enlightenment.

Readers may differ when I say probably Buddha's teaching mission was strongly motivated by his mind being conditioned by the prophecy in his childhood that he was destined to become a great religious leader. It is a strong influencing factor. It is clear that karma and reincarnation are the principal beliefs that the

Buddha absorbed into the fabric of his teachings, as these two beliefs could not be left out if his teachings were to survive. If not for this step, there probably would not be any Buddhism today, as evident from the failed missions led by renowned contemporaries of Buddha, who denied an afterlife in their teachings. Rejection of the concept of an afterlife was not what people wanted to hear, as it was a strong belief that had been handed down over generations. Listening to someone preach anything against a person's beliefs deeply hurts the psyche and causes acute stress. This is an undeniable truth that all of us experience. Therefore, as an essential requisite, the Buddha would have understood the need to avoid such hurt and stress in his teachings.

We see that Buddha adopted the Hindu karma and reincarnation concepts in a smart manner without making them detrimental to what he wanted to teach. The Buddha expanded the commonly believed karma concept to a novel level by defining a wide range of karma categories. This enhancement was readily accepted by the masses, as the karma concept had a deep influence on human minds. Even the followers of other religions, seem to express a wide degree of leaning towards the karma concept, as it logically fills several unexplainable gaps that lacked explanations of life

situations, though in reality the application of karma mostly fits into life matters as a consolatory belief. For example, the reasoning behind a child born with learning difficulties will be God's will for a Christian parent and karma for a Buddhist parent.

The Buddha also included the concept of heavens and hells with gods, goddesses, and Mara (the devil) in his teachings, as these had been common beliefs for a lengthy period prior to Buddha. All these pre-existing beliefs that had survived for a long time were good tools that could be used to promote the moral behavior of the people. The most crucial item for the Buddha was the adaptation of the reincarnation concept into his teachings that had a direct link with the concept of soul or atman, in Hinduism. The anatta concept that the Buddha discovered, fully contradicted the concept of soul, by totally rejecting the idea of a soul undergoing reincarnation. Instead of the soul-based Hindu principle behind reincarnation, the Buddha introduced a subtle twist in his strategy, contending that it is not the soul that continues to the next life after death but, in fact, the last thought of a person at the time of death that continues to the next life, thus explaining the continuity of the stream of thoughts of a person. The Buddha called this rebirth to retain the widespread belief while subtly differentiating it from Hindu reincarnation.

## **Confusion Caused by Anatta and Rebirth**

Re-birth and anatta, both taught by Buddha, were not mutually compatible and could have easily led to turmoil among the rational thinkers of his time. Therefore, one could inquire as to whether this anomaly was brought up at his time. References in the Buddhist canon very clearly show Buddha being extremely cautious about this issue to avoid the emergence of controversy. Rebirth, though mentioned in number of suttas, cannot co-exist alongside the anatta concept of a logical thinker. Hence, the Buddha did not delve into anatta in regular discourses but only discussed it with monks far advanced in understanding. As anatta was his core discovery and an indispensable feature in his doctrine, he had to ensure it would not in any way be distorted, notwithstanding that rebirth had to be accommodated for strategic reasons.

According to scripture, there were ten questions that the Buddha refrained from answering. "Will the Buddha be reborn?" was one of the ten questions. However, the Buddha was compelled to answer this question once, in order to override confusion caused by an answer to this question by his cousin Anuruddha, who was

renowned for emulating the Buddha's style of answering Dharma questions.

Buddha answered this question in the discourse, **Anuradha Sutta** (not Anuruddha Sutta). Here, the Buddha stresses that there is nothing that can be found or defined as a soul or self. Buddha reiterated that there is no entity rooted to be identified even as the Buddha. Buddha explained that the five aggregates that people conventionally used to define soul had no bearing on holding such a claim, as none of the five aggregates taken individually, taken in any combination, or all the aggregates combined, can be construed as self or soul. In short, his logic generalized that any question referring to self is wrong, and hence an answer cannot be construed. This logic that is primarily based on the anatta concept, can be applied to any living being, negating the existence of any form of self while exemplifying the unreality of an afterlife for a non-existing entity.

Therefore, we can assume the rebirth the Buddha adopted to preach was mainly focused on persons who believed in reincarnation. Buddhist literature shows that it was helpful for the Buddha mended his preaching to suite certain occasions, fulfill specific objectives, and also to get over certain tricky situations he came across. On few occasions, rebirth was helpful to the Buddha to use as a psychotherapeutic treatment for those who needed

mental relief. The Buddha provided King Kosala with mental relief after he was disturbed by the dreams, he saw in which his dead relatives were in agony. This is a fine example of how Buddha used belief in the afterlife to explain the dreams to suit the situation.

Buddha's discovery, comprising the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the concept of anatta, was more suited for intellectuals than ordinary followers. The five ascetics were intelligent and understood Buddha's discovery. As they were ardent Hindu believers, their mind conditioning would have been centered on soul-based concepts. Hence, it would have not been easy for them to accept the Buddha's anatta concept. But they did exactly the opposite by accepting all that the Buddha preached. It is recorded that all five attained enlightenment precisely by listening to the **Anattalakkana Sutta**. That shows the depth of penetrating insight that they had to absorb anatta and realize what the Buddha taught, and at the same token, how clever the Buddha had been in teaching his precious discovery in an understandable manner to them.

## **Two Stories Stemming from Buddhism**

“Every religion tells you a finely spun story.” This essay started with this statement. Hence, what is the story behind Buddhism?

Basically, there are two stories emerging from the Buddha’s teachings. Let us get to them!

### **The First Story – Buddhism Stream 1**

This story represents the essence of the Buddha’s teachings, elaborating on the realities of life. It encourages the followers to ponder the content and practice to enhance their thinking, to investigate the question of who am I? Under this discipline, there is no supreme God or existence of an impersonal absolute force anywhere that can help you salvage yourself. The teachings strictly deny all forms of superstition and paranormal beliefs that stem mostly from primitive cultures. The Dharma material is full of rich philosophical concepts, including a purposeful path to cultivate, to reach a highly philosophical state, to understand how the mind works and to engage it for life refinement. Hence, this sector of Buddhist doctrine is not really a fabricated story but a set of research materials that could be used to enhance your

thinking process purposefully and use the utilitarian value of it to improve the quality of life.

The Buddhist ideologies considered under this stream are more suited to thinkers who are rational and philosophical than to ordinary individuals. This stream can be considered the undistorted version of Buddhist teachings based on the inclusion of only the core Dharma of Buddha's discovery. Its emphasis is purely on understanding the inner nature of the human psyche that can be directed to experiencing the ending of all mind-based Dukkha.

Basically, few discourses mentioned below, along with the Dhammacakkappavattana sutta and the Anattalakkana sutta, spell out the core teachings of the Buddha, while a wide percentage of other suttas in the Pali Canon contain events pertinent material and numerous supplementary teachings that were targeted at followers with spiritual and faith-oriented mindsets.

**Kalama Sutta** is an open invitation that encourages seekers to slice and dice what they come across to see whether the material still appeals to their reasoning, before accepting it. This even includes what Buddha himself taught. According to Buddha,



whatever is accepted without an open and broad evaluation is akin to blind belief, deprived of wisdom.

**Mulapariyaya Sutta** discusses the topic of “the root of all things,” touching on the anatta concept that leads to the question, “Who am I?” It is stated in the footnotes of this sutta that at the end of this discourse, the listeners indicated that they were not pleased with what they had heard from Buddha. Probably, the content might have been too complex for them to understand, or the material might not have been what they wanted to hear.

**Sussima Sutta** clearly expresses denial of acquiring any form of supernatural powers by attaining enlightenment, yet ordinary people expected such powers to be exhibited by the spiritual leaders. As renditioned in the Dhammapada, the mind is central and prime for a person to have a penetrative insight to realize the ultimate nature and reality of life. Persons like Angulimala - a mass murderer, Uggasena - an acrobat, and Sunitha - a scavenger and several more persons, including a few females, demonstrated the ability of their penetrative insight by becoming enlightened, merely by listening to a single sermon of the Buddha. None of them were worshippers of Buddha, had any deep knowledge of Dharma, had any experience in meditation or performed other sacred spiritual rituals that Buddhist followers believed to be essential for liberation from Dukkha. They stuck to wisdom

instantly, proving that what matters is the breakthrough of a cognitive insight into reality rather than having to do the performance of elaborate religious or spiritual practices. Wisdom is different from knowledge. They would not have had any knowledge to explain to others what they achieved, but they had the overview of wisdom to experience the nature of life as it is.

By studying deeply into the complex elements of the Dharma, someone can gain knowledge of the Dharma, but that does not necessarily transform into wisdom. If that person does not have the ability to absorb and integrate Dharma into his or her psyche righteously, unfortunately, his or her knowledge could lead to stress, confusion, and anxiety, which are very opposite to what he or she is trying to seek, the mitigation of Dukkha. The underlying fact is that knowledge becomes irrelevant when insight is used to grasp the actual nature of reality.

Characteristically, the followers of the first story could be expected to be inquisitive, enquiring researchers who will act independently to investigate Dharma. The ideologies that get attention in this story are basically the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Anatta concept, which are considered the fundamentals of Buddhist teachings. These

fundamentals should be properly understood, and the prescribed path must be duly ingrained in your thinking process to effectively enable you to enjoy a Dukkha-free mental status, which is what the Buddha enjoyed as nirvana, the supreme bliss. This statement at first glance seems direct and simple, but there is a deeper aspect to ponder further, as regards the conundrum that freedom from Dukkha cannot exist without Dukkha being there. So, think deeply!

## **Second Story – Buddhism Stream 2**

The second story diverts Buddhism to be considered a religion rather than a philosophy, which is the outlook that the first story projected. The reason has been the inclusion of common ideas found in the stories of other world religions. However, though this story is substantially inclined towards a format of religion, to sustain the separation of Buddhism from the other religions, it still has its own minor and major differences along the specific fields of the common themes.

In this story, in addition to the Buddhist fundamentals discussed previously in the first story, it incorporates Hindu cosmology to include various levels of heavens, hells, gods, goddesses,

brahmas, Mara, etc., and most importantly, the concepts of karma and rebirth to provide the worthy hope of another life after death. This story is more palatable to a wide range of Buddhist followers as it provides multiple ways and means to engage in activities that will give psychological consolation in working towards set goals to gain benefits in this life and to have superior expectations in future lives. Under this story, the followers become believers, and it is common to find that they love having a deep faith-based ownership of Buddhism, similar to what could be found amongst the followers of other religions.

At the outset of this essay, it was mentioned that religions introduce mental concerns to your psyche and give guidance on how to overcome them. For example, Christianity declares that you are a sinner based on the creation story that they believe. To overcome sin, the Bible specifies that you must have complete faith in God, and be of good conduct, for your soul to qualify to enter the kingdom of God or heaven. According to Christianity, the soul of a person after death does not go to heaven immediately, but the soul becomes dormant, and must wait till the day of the judgment, for a decision on its destination. Depending on God's judgment the soul will be admitted to heaven or hell if the faith and conduct of that person are unsatisfactory.

Unfortunately, the judgment date is very speculative, and hence no one knows when it is going to happen.

This is what the second story in Buddhism declares. It says that your life did not start with this birth. The issue with your life that started eons ago, is that you are on a journey through a series of birth and death cycles. Do not question what caused you to have your very first birth. It is not important to waste your time on the question. That question is a parable about a man stuck by a poison arrow, and he is wasting time by insisting on knowing the details of the archer rather than taking action to remove the arrow. You will be born over and over after each life to be kept on the Samsara cycle forever. Your future births and the things happening in your present life are mostly influenced by the karma that you have done in your past lives and in your present life. That is how matters operate in the Samsara journey.

Life is fundamentally full of Dukkha and all things in life are subjected to impermanence. The only way out of the cycle of birth and death is by attaining the state of nirvana. The Noble Eightfold Path is the prescription to follow to attain nirvana. Having an undoubted faith in Dharma, performing virtuous deeds, spiritual acts, worshipping the triple gems and parents, visiting temples, offering food to monks and the poor, etc., are helpful to gather good karma, which in turn will help you in the journey leading to

nirvana. However, it would be a somewhat easier way to attain nirvana, if you worked for it now, aiming to be born during the time of Maitreya Buddha, in the future. Maitreya Buddha is presently a god in Tushita Heaven, and as prophesied, will be born on earth to rediscover enlightenment and teach Dharma in about 5000 years from now.

Meanwhile, in the interim births under this target, you have opportunities to be born in various tiers of heavens depending on the good-merited karma that you have acquired. Also, you should not forget that you are running the risk of being born in hells, or as a low life form if your conduct is not good or you gather demerit karma. If you are born in a low life form and if you are still eligible by virtue of karma and looking to acquire good merits to ease your agony, you may be able to share the merits of meritorious deeds that your relatives, friends, and others may decide to perform on your behalf. By doing this meritorious act of sharing the merits with you, your relatives and friends will not lose any of their merits, but instead, such acts will automatically expand their collection of merits.

Likewise, there are so many customs that have been added to be done at birth of a child, marriage, death, etc., in this stream of

Buddhist “story,” and new rituals like “bodhi puja” are regularly getting added to accommodate the needs of Buddhist society.

Though Buddhism is not a theistic religion, the followers of this stream of Buddhism believe in gods and other higher forms of life like brahmas, living in thousands of heavens and other superior worlds in the universe. The Buddhist literature has lot of stories relating the visits of gods to meet the Buddha and the Buddha visiting the heavens for distinct reasons, including to preach Dharma to his mother.

There are Buddhist followers who perform various rituals for the gods, expecting favors in return. Similarly, they also believe in the existence of low life forms like spirits, demons, and ghosts in an overlapping world with the human one that they can influence to have woeful effects on human lives. Trades and businesses have developed around these beliefs, offering services to relieve or control those woeful spells for those who are affected. There are so many speculative and skeptical beliefs in this version of Buddhism for those who want to grab them to suit their choices.

When you reach the top of a mountain, you see its contours more clearly than when you were in a particular contour. Digging into mystic beliefs is like going down a mountain, reaching darkness rather than seeking clarity with insight into reality. Hence, I

presume, it is of no use to enumerate more beliefs of this nature, as the readers will not be interested in going more into those darker avenues of this stream of Buddhism.

Though I have presented the two streams of Buddhism without any challenge from the readers (ha!), in the real world, irrespective of people's intellectual capacities, what Buddhists tend to follow are various combinations of these two streams. Followers add or delete the Dharma elements to suit their leanings and harmonize their psyches with beliefs of their preference. Satisfying our beliefs is like feeding our hunger. That is human nature.

## **Epilogue**

Beliefs have a profound impact on the human psyche, significantly influencing our thoughts and actions. The sensitivity we have towards our beliefs can often trigger extreme reactions, leading to insanity when our views are challenged or ridiculed, such as insults directed towards deities. Unfortunately, history is littered with examples of people being punished or doomed because of beliefs, such as a scientist being burned at the stake for a discovery that contradicted what's in a holy book on the



movement of the sun or followers of religious cults committing mass suicide in pursuit of their leaders' teachings on boarding a spacecraft expected to have taken them to heaven.

It is crucial to recognize people's intense sensitivities to beliefs. As duly emphasized in this essay, the Buddha considered this reality, even to the extent of integrating few existing beliefs into his teachings, which led to the popular religious format of Buddhism. Many learned Buddhist monks avoid discussing disparities resulting from such beliefs as a measure to maintain peace and harmony in people's personal beliefs. I had to deviate from that stand in authoring this essay, as it is difficult to present honest and straightforward ideas while being aware that some readers may naturally react strongly.

It was important for me to consider facts such as Prince Siddhartha's upbringing, pre-Buddhist beliefs, the core Dharma Buddha discovered, the influence of Hinduism on Buddhist teachings, the development phases of our psyche, and our thought generation process to justify and clarify what might have been the Buddha's strategy to convey his message without disrupting the beliefs that existed at his time. I trust the readers will evaluate my views in that context with an open mind.

Obviously, the first two suttas of the Buddha, divulged the essence of what Buddha discovered from the research mission he embarked on after being stuck by the mental disturbance of the impermanence nature of life, in spite of the fact that he lived with luxurious facilities. His discovery was a pragmatic prescription for behavior that can be developed to stop the Dukkha generating thoughts and feelings. The elements of the noble eightfold path justify the practicality of mitigating Dukkha thoughts and feelings if they are practiced and integrated into the thinking process.

The concept of Anatta is the core philosophical discovery, denying the existence of a soul, which forms the foundation of Hindu beliefs. The five ascetics became enlightened, understood the delusional concept of self, and changed their soul-based Hindu beliefs after the realization of Anatta.

All forms of religious beliefs will endure for a long time because they have been providing tremendous help to a huge mass of people. Leaving aside the negative aspects that religious extremists and narrow-minded individuals might create, religious virtues and practices are excellent sources of consolation for people on many communal and familial occasions. Faith in beliefs especially becomes handy when there are no alternative

resources of support, such as for individuals who experience psychological anguish. Religions unite people through fostering a sense of community spirit, offering a platform for the moral development of children, and serving as a source of community support for the social services needed by the poor, sick, and homeless.

The above does not mean whether the religious beliefs are true or not. As stated in the essay, people's lives are trapped in religions that introduce psychological fear linked with reward and punishment schemes applicable to their present lives and the life after death. The peculiar characteristic of the human psyche is the inability to perceive this fact.

It does not really matter if you like to know if Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy. However, I think it is crucial for each individual to understand the difference between a "story" that seems to be leading them on a meaningless ride and a "story" that is logical and has rich material coming from a discovery. It will be beneficial to have a debate within yourself to sort out these issues and understand whether you really have a problem with your life that religion is pressuring you to fix. Logically, what is prudent is to understand the essence of how and why our psyche is drawn to various beliefs, and why we find ourselves interested in inquiring into other people's made-up imaginary stories, and why

we try to live with these religion-imposed hopes in conceptual worlds.

This essay is a product of the writer's interest in religions and focuses on fundamental Buddhist teachings. For more detailed Dharma elements, readers can refer to the writer's other books. The purpose of this essay is not to persuade anyone to adopt or reject any particular belief or ideology. It is to provide a clear and straightforward perspective on what Buddhism is and how it can benefit our lives. I hope it has inspired some to think more deeply about their beliefs and encouraged others to explore Buddhism further. Thank you for reading this essay.

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"Thinking is difficult, that's why most people judge."

- Carl Jung

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